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Joint written statement* submitted by the International Alliance of Women, Women's Federation for World Peace International, Soroptimist International and Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status, and Graduate Women International (GWI), European Union of Women, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), International Council of Jewish Women, and International Movement for Fraternal Union Among Races and Peoples, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Child Widowhood: A Neglected Gender and Human Rights Violation

For nearly 100 years, Graduate Women International (GWI) has promoted the advancement of the status of women and girls through lifelong learning and education. Consequently, we raise again our concerns that, despite the many ratifications to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the consensus of the Beijing Platform for Action and the widespread support for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adult and child widows continue to be excluded from the progress made in advancing the status of millions of women and girls worldwide. Having raised this issue previously in 2008 (Women's Worlds Madrid)[1] and 2011 (Women's Worlds Ottawa)[2], GWI reemphasizes concerns over social, economic and cultural hardships widows' lives are tainted with, often indefinitely. Widowhood is one of the most neglected gender and human rights issues, condemning millions of widows and their children, whose lives are determined, not by modern laws but by discriminatory interpretations of customary law.[3] Examinations of widowhood typically centre around elderly women who do, indeed, receive the most attention from the United Nations (UN), governments, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Yet, GWI reminds that widows are of all ages, with child widows frequently having no such champions. The number of young widows is increasing worldwide due to war, disease and violence and they, and their children, suffer as economic and social status outcasts frequently lacking any opportunity of pursuing an education. Young widows are mostly found living in rural areas, especially in Africa and South Asia, where patriarchal customs often dominate and where customary law is followed at the expense of modern age marriage legislation. In such contexts, widowhood is deemed a social death. Furthermore, in many societies the mourning rights of the widows are shrouded with cultural beliefs. However, bereavement cannot be standardised and is an individual emotional crisis in itself. To garner support from States, who give the issue scant attention, widowhood must be viewed as an economic crisis and an opportunity for humanitarian action rather than a cultural issue. The collaboration of States, alongside NGOs is more crucial than ever.

Addressing the multiple and intersecting discriminating culture and social practices does not open Pandora's Box; rather it opens young widows' rights

Estimates from 2015 show that there are more than 258 million widows worldwide.[4] However, a realistic number of child widows is indeterminate due to the lack of attention this segment of society receives from the UN and States, limiting the speed at which the girls' welfare can be addressed. Plus, the vulnerable nature of child widows drastically affects data collection as these victims, being afraid of the consequences of speaking out, mostly opt to remain silent. But their widowhood is not muted at the community level; remaining on the radar, these girls are subjected to the triple blow of being discriminated against because of their gender, their age and deep-seated, societal superstitions and mourning practices. These strip away human rights, acquisitive and decision-making powers of the girls. Purifying traditions such as forced sex and marriage with the groom's close relative, gang rape and scarification are brought upon the widow regardless of her will and age. Nutritional prohibitions restraining widows from eating meats and fish threaten her development and weaken her health, increasing risks of suffering from malnutrition and preventable diseases. The forced loss of contact with family members and the seizing of the widow's properties and possessions by the family of the groom lead to isolation and loss of dignity.[5] These destructive customs rob a young widow of her right to gain education, whether traditional or non-traditional, and GWI reiterates its concerns about young widows and reminds States that signing in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development implies that insufficient support for child widows implicates a lack of commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[6]. It also goes against the essential concept of "leave no one behind".

Cultural and social discrimination of widows is directly proportional to economic vulnerability and impoverishment

While most data regarding young widows is anecdotal, empirical evidence exists linking cultural stigmatisation with low income. Data also shows that cultural discrimination results in economic dependency which underscores a widow's financial vulnerability. Further, without financial literacy opportunities, young widows remain in poverty; disenfranchised from their societies, often for a lifetime. Due to their underage and marital status they frequently

1 GWI, International Federation of University Women (IFUW), Anne Holden Rønning, Women's Worlds Madrid, 2008

2 GWI, IFUW, Anne Holden Rønning, Women's Worlds Ottawa, 2011

3 http://globalfundforwidows.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Communications-CSW62-Final.pdf

4 http://www.theloombafoundation.org/

5 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-widows-rituals

6 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300

become sex, domestic or labour slaves for the family of the husband. Offspring of these widows can also be neglected; their mothers being unable to provide a livelihood, financial future or academic development necessary to change the cycle. Hence, the children, in turn, remain within the trenches of poverty, unable to grow economically or attend school to reach their full potential.

GWI is concerned about the lack of economic security of widowed girls and requests that States develop laws specifically targeting livelihood opportunities for young widows. Access to financial growth will lessen the gap of disparity and enable widows to contribute to a nation's economic growth.[7] The sustained impossibility of educational or trade skill attainment eliminates the prospect of finding any potential employment, the consequences of which will undoubtedly be reflected in States' economies. SDG 8, on decent work and economic growth, targets 8.5 and 8.6 intend to grant full and productive employment for all and a reduction of the proportion of youth unemployment, focusing on education and training. The co-existence of child widows and the implementation of SDG 8 is simply impossible. We offer to work alongside the Council, States and other NGOs to create solutions and set milestones for success.

Education is a State's obligation

The ambitious SDGs are at risk of leaving child widows behind as the SDGs have failed to include young widows within their targets. For example, SDG 4 target 4.5 focuses on the elimination of gender disparities in education and on ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable but says nothing about widows. In many countries, laws and cultures remove the opportunity of an education away from young widows the moment their husband dies. Although progress in basic education rights for girls in rural areas in developing countries has improved, traditions remain the decisive factor in a young widow's future. Accused of witchcraft, mariticide and impurity, the right to pursue an education or trade disappears once disadvantaged by widowhood.[8] GWI reminds States of the consequences of the lethal combination of low education and high poverty rates that affect the quality of life of its inhabitants, leading to negative-growth economies and persistent deterioration of society.

Positive steps forward are the establishment of International Widow's Day held annually on 23 June and the Widow's Charter, both of which have served to increase awareness and recognition of this global issue and reduce discrimination within the community and public life.[9] GWI is encouraged by the work of Widows Development Organisation[10] and the Global Fund for Widows[11] who have been instrumental in influencing laws forbidding persecution of widows and improving lives. But more effort on providing education is needed. A single day to raise awareness about the injustices widows face is not enough. Widowhood must be included when discussing gender inequality. Child widows are already hiding; GWI reminds States and organisations of their duty to come to their aid in providing support. With the issue of child widows having been entirely overlooked by Millennium Development Goals, GWI insists states not make the same mistake while implementing the 2030 SDG Agenda.

Recommendations

To create a positive momentum, GWI recommends the following actions to the UN and the Council:

- Collaboration with NGOs to collect empirical data about child widows.
- Apply data to State Action Plans that aim to assist child widows and improve access to justice and equality.
- As a protection measure, create and reinforce State widow registration; define widowhood as a separate, legal civilian status.
- Appoint a United Nations Special Rapporteur on widowhood.
- Implement measures such as awareness programmes promoting human rights and gender rights, and laws protecting child widows that penalise perpetrators of abuse and discrimination.
- Offer accessible and affordable courses for young widows such as livelihood building (entrepreneurship), legal rights and financial literacy; social support, as well as reintegration plans and protection within their communities.
- Carry out investigations within legal frameworks to ensure agents are providing proper assistance to the widows who reach out for help.
- Encourage States to include widowhood reporting in their UPR and CEDAW reviews.

7 https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/06/560282-international-day-un-says-widows-rights-independent-life-livelihood-after-loss

8 http://globalfundforwidows.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Communications-CSW62-Final.pdf

9 http://www.widowsforpeace.org/widows-charter/

10http://widoafrica.org/

11 http://globalfundforwidows.org/